WALT DISNEY STUDIOS, CASTING BUILDING
Alameda Avenue & Buena Vista Street
Burbank
Los Angeles County
California

HABS CA-2639-C
CA-2639-C

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

Casting Building, Disney Studios

HABS No. CA-2639-C

Location: The Casting Building is situated on the Disney Studios Lot, located at 500 South Buena Vista Street in the City of Burbank, Los Angeles County, California.

Present Owner And Occupant: The Walt Disney Company.

Significance: Designed in 1938 and built in 1939-40, the Casting Building at Disney Studios is one of the original buildings constructed at the Burbank Disney Studios on Buena Vista Street after the studio moved from Hyperion Avenue in Hollywood. Historical documentation indicates that the Casting Building was the first improvement on the Burbank lot and served as a studio for the design team. Here they finished the designs for the other studio buildings even as construction on those buildings' foundations, and other site work, commenced.

Originally built as a warehouse, this structure was remodeled into offices in 1958 and thereafter was used as the "Casting Building." Architect Kem Weber incorporated both Modern and Streamline Moderne design principles into his overall concept for the Burbank Disney campus, and so although this was intended as a utilitarian building, the architectural details of the Casting Building were part of the unified architectural vocabulary used throughout the Burbank Disney Studios.

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The building was constructed in 1939-40.

2. Architect: Kem Weber.

3. Original and subsequent owners, uses: The Casting Building is located at Disney Studios, founded by Walt and Roy Disney, and is owned by the Walt Disney Company.

4. Builder: Frank Scott Crowhurst.

5. Original plans and construction: The original layout of the Casting Building included a rectangular plan with small rooms lining the south and west sides of the building. The interior room walls and the warehouse walls were unfinished plywood. Adjoining the north wall at the west end of the building, there were two restrooms and a staircase leading to the attic. In the earliest photographs, ca. 1939, the Casting Building's windows do not have metal awnings. The primary entrance on Buena Vista Street was covered with an attached curved awning in the Streamline Moderne style.

6. Alterations and additions: It appears that the earliest substantial alteration to the building was the addition of metal awnings over many of the windows, which probably occurred in 1940. The awnings are on many of the original Kem Weber Disney Studio buildings and appear to be a unifying design element used throughout the campus to shade windows. In 1958, the Casting Building was remodeled from a warehouse into office space. It was after this remodel that the warehouse, which was originally known as "Building 10," became the Casting Building. During the 1958 alteration, the metal awnings were removed and a secondary screen structure was constructed to shade the windows. The screen was offset a few feet from the façade on the south and west elevations, while on the east side the screen extended to the edge of the lawn. The 1958 alteration also included the enclosure of the covered entranceway on the southwest corner of the building, creating an enclosed foyer at the primary entrance. Other 1958 alterations include the partitioning into offices of the open plan area of the former warehouse and the resurfacing of the building with stucco. In 1995, the building was remodeled and the screening was removed. The enclosed entranceway was retrofitted with high performance laminated glass and signage was added on top of the entranceway awning. Tile was removed on the enclosed entranceway's south elevation, and a brick veneer was added. New metal awnings were added above the windows.

B. Historical Context:

Walt Disney Studios

Walt Disney arrived in Hollywood in 1923, at a time when films were approaching the status of an industry. Studios had been established over the previous decade in Hollywood, Culver City and in the San Fernando Valley. After initial attempts at breaking into the movie business, Walt concluded the only way he could be successful was with cartoons. He started by selling joke reels to movie theaters, as he had earlier with Laugh-O-gram Films, Inc., in Kansas City. However, he faced a major challenge - the animation business was centered in New York and there were few cartoonists to help him in Hollywood. But, in partnership with his brother, Roy Disney, Walt went on to successfully launch the Walt Disney Company in 1923 with *Alice in Wonderland.* From the rear of a small office occupied by Holly-Vermont Realty in Los Angeles, Walt and Roy Disney produced a series of short live-action/animated films, the *Alice Comedies.*

Within four months, the staff had grown and the Disney brothers decided to move next door to larger facility, the "Disney Bros. Studio." The successful negotiation of a new contract for the *Alice Comedies* in February, 1926, coincided with the move into a new studio on Hyperion Avenue in the Silver Lake district, a few miles from downtown Los Angeles.[1]

During the next 14 years, the studio went through many changes: Mickey Mouse was "born" in 1928, followed by Pluto, Goofy, Donald Duck, and the rest of the Disney characters. The success of Mickey Mouse led to the first of numerous additions and alterations to the Hyperion studio complex. In 1929 and 1930 new offices were constructed, and by 1931 a new two-storied animation building and sound stage had been completed. In 1937, with the success of Disney's first full-length animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt realized the company could only expand by producing full-length movies, and he began devoting his attention to features, a new and unexplored medium. The Hyperion Avenue plant had grown chaotically, spilling to adjoining lots and across the street, and could no longer fully accommodate the studio. In 1937 and 1938 alone, the studio had added facilities including a feature building, three film vaults, part of a sound stage, test camera bungalow, camera building, projection booth, electric shop, sound shop, paint lab, and inking building. After the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Disney Studios needed a larger campus to expand their production capabilities. The Hyperion Studio in Hollywood had grown to its limit, and Walt and Roy Disney began looking for a new location in 1938. Walt and Roy both agreed they needed to build a new studio. On August 31, 1939, they put a deposit of $10,000 on 51 acres of land in Burbank, just over the hills of Griffith Park, for the purpose of developing a modern studio specifically designed for making animated films. The 51-acre site on Buena Vista Street in Burbank was purchased by Walt and Roy Disney in 1938 for $100,000.[2]

The still semi-rural area of Burbank provided enough space to design and build a custom studio designed specifically for the fast-growing Disney Studio. According to biographer Bob Thomas, "The center of the production process would be the Animation Building, where the various phases of animation could flow smoothly from one to the other in a movie-making assembly line."[3] All parts of the new studio were custom designed in accordance to a program developed by the Disney brothers. Designed features included furniture, landscape, roads, recreational spaces, and the buildings themselves.

Stylistically, architecture of the Disney Studio used largely Moderne forms, but the minimal decoration and orthogonal massing were closer to the Modern Movement. Indeed, in a written "Discussion of the New Burbank Disney Studio" by the general contractor, Frank Crowhurst, Crowhurst argued, "We have arrived at our present style of

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[1] Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney, An American Original* (NY: The Walt Disney Company, 1994), 69-80, 109, 144-145, 157; *Walt Disney Studios History* (http://studioservices.go.com/disneystudios/history.html).

[2] Thomas, 145.

[3] Thomas, 158.

architecture through discussions with Walt, Bill Garity, Roy and myself…We have a functional group of buildings, and according to true architecture, that is the best…we can call it functional modernism or modern functional buildings."[4] According to Crowhurst, "Walt" required that the buildings be functional in accordance to the program and that there be no useless decorative ornamentation. On the interiors, however, the furniture and fixtures were Streamline Moderne in design.

The Casting Building was the first building constructed on the Burbank studio lot and functioned as a studio for Walt Disney and the architects to finalize their design of the remaining buildings after construction of their foundations and other site work commenced. In the January 1941 issue of *California Arts and Architecture* Magazine, the future Casting Building's role as a temporary design studio is mentioned. According to the editors of the magazine, "design units and full size construction crews were organized on the studio payroll and coordinated in a field office (future warehouse) built on the job. In this way foundations and underground work could proceed while the superstructure was still a series of conferences and studied sketches."[5] After the campus was completed, the building was used as a shipping and delivery warehouse.

As mentioned above, the earliest substantial alteration to the building was the addition of metal awnings over many of the windows, which probably occurred in 1940. The awnings were a uniform shading device used on many of the Disney Studio buildings that were south and west facing. In 1958, the Casting Building was remodeled from a warehouse into office space. It was after this remodel that the warehouse, which was originally known as "Building 10," became the Casting Building. During the 1958 alteration, a secondary metal mesh screen on a secondary structural system was constructed to shade the windows. This was a common postwar-Modern shading device used to shade windows, glass walls, and other openings. Also in 1958, the covered entranceway on the southwest corner of the building was enclosed creating, an interior entrance foyer. Other 1958 alterations included the partitioning into offices of the open plan area of the former warehouse and the resurfacing of the building with stucco. In 1995, the building was remodeled and the screening was removed. The enclosed entranceway was retrofitted with high performance laminated glass and signage was added on top of the entranceway awning. Tile was removed on the enclosed entranceway's south elevation, and a brick veneer was added. New metal awnings were added above the windows. Since the 1995 remodel, the double-doors and signage on Buena Vista Street were removed and a glass-panel was inserted in its place.

Kem Weber

Architect Kem Weber was born in 1889 in Berlin. He was trained to be a cabinetmaker before attending the Academy of Applied Arts in Berlin earning a degree in 1912. Weber left Germany in 1914 to help supervise the construction of the German exhibit at the

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[4]Frank Crowhurst interviewed by Gerrit Roelof, "Discussion on New Burbank Disney Studio," April 16, 1940.

[5] *California Arts and Architecture*, January 1941.

Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. During his stay in San Francisco, World War I began and Weber was unable to return to Germany. Being a German national in California while the United States and Germany were at war, made it extremely difficult for Weber to find work. During the war years he painted flowerpots, worked as a lumberjack in the high sierras, and operated a chicken farm.

After the war, Weber moved first to Santa Barbara and later to Los Angeles where he worked for the Baker Brothers as a draftsman. In Los Angeles he befriended other German Modernists, Richard Neutra, R. M. Schindler, and J. R. Davidson. Weber obtained his first important commission to design the interiors and furniture of the Moderne style Mayfair Hotel. The Mayfair Hotel allowed Weber to experiment with an Americanized version of the Zigzag Parisian Moderne. According to architectural historian David Gebhard, "his version of the Zigzag Moderne was less formal than that of Paris and also, it contained many elements of construction and of materials which were related to the turn of the century Arts and Crafts movement and to the then-emerging International Style."[6]

In 1927, Weber opened his own design practice in Hollywood, but remained as a "design consultant" for Baker Brothers. The first few years of Weber's practice included largely interior and furniture design, but also included lighting, silverware, and some residential building design.[7] Weber's practice continued to grow and he began to receive larger projects although he continued to have a diversified practice. In the years preceding the Disney Studios project, Weber designed a roadside restaurant, an interior of a private plane cabin, commercial interiors, furniture, graphic design for stationary and boxes, landscapes, silverware, movie-sets, clocks, and several homes. Weber was also invited to participate in many Modern design exhibits and in 1931 became chairman of Department of Industrial Design of the newly formed Art Center School in Los Angeles. Weber's diversified design practice was attractive to Walt Disney who wanted a unified design for his new studio campus. For the Disney Studios, Weber designed the buildings, landscape, furniture, and fixtures.

After the Disney Studio project Weber continued to grow his interesting and diverse design practice. Later projects included large commercial building remodels, gas stations for the Union Oil Company, and a kit-of-parts housing system for wartime housing. His most famous furniture piece was the "Airline Chair" designed from 1934-1935.

Part II. Architectural Information

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Casting Building is a one-story warehouse building with an attic. The building was remodeled and partitioned into office spaces in 1958. The building is structured with perimeter stud walls and a

[6] David Gebhard, Kem Weber, *The Moderne in Southern California1920-1941* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1969) 39.
[7] Ibid, 40.

longitudinal row of 8" x 8" wood columns supporting the center of the building. The stud walls have wood bracing at the corners and every 25'. The roof is supported by wood carpenter trusses that span the transversal length of the building. The roof is slightly hipped with a small parapet on all four sides of the building. The exterior of the building is surfaced with stucco and has two decorative wood bands or courses spaced eight feet apart, with the lower band starting just above the top height of the windows. The windows are casement windows. The interior of the building has Gypsum board walls and carpet. The restrooms, staircase, and offices adjacent to the west perimeter wall are original to the building. Although the original covered exterior entranceway has been enclosed and the original metal awnings were removed and then replaced with new awnings, the building does retain enough integrity to convey its architectural history. The minimally adorned former warehouse building is the first building constructed on the Disney Studio Burbank lot and was designed using the architectural vocabulary developed by Kem Weber, for the original set of buildings at the Disney Studios.

2. Condition of Fabric: The building is in excellent condition. It appears that the building has been properly maintained and therefore there is no noticeable damage or aging to the building.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: The Casting Building is a one-story warehouse building that has been remodeled into offices. The structural bays are evenly spaced on both the longitudinal and transversal sides of the building. The building has two bays on its east and west elevations, and eight bays on the north and south elevations. The Casting Building measures 40' long and 100' wide. The enclosed covered entranceway on the southwest corner of the building extends 10' 3" to the west, and 8' 6" to the south.

2. Foundations: The foundations are made of poured-in-place concrete set on a grid of three foot square concrete footings 1'deep placed 2' below grade. There are three rows of footings beneath the building.

3. Walls: The walls are stucco finished with paint. There are two rows of decorative wood bands or courses spaced 8'apart, with the lower band starting just above the top height of the windows. Between the upper band and the parapet, there are 2' x 2' air vents on the north and east elevations. There is a thin strip of coping at the top of the parapet. The walls for the enclosed covered entranceway on the southwest corner are wood studs with a brick veneer on the south and west elevation.

4. Structural System, Framing: The Casting Building floor rests on a concrete foundation. The floor framing for the building consists of a one foot square sill that supports the four load bearing stud walls of the former warehouse,

which is divided into eight sections by seven slightly pitched carpenter trusses. The trusses run transversally from north to south. The center of the trusses are supported by eight inch square columns that are attached at the bottom to the central row of footings, and run vertically to the mid-point of the trusses. The wood columns are covered in Gypsum board painted white in the interior and are exposed unfinished columns in the attic. The walls are framed in 2" x 6" wood studs with wood bracing at the corners and every 25'.

5. Stairways: There are no exterior stairs.

6. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The building has three external doorways. On the north elevation there is one exterior door. The door is wood with a single window placed just above the doorknob. The door is finished in green paint. On the east elevation there is one exterior door. Like the door on the north façade, the east door is wood with a single glass window above the doorknob and is finished in green paint. There is one door on the south elevation. The south door is located on the east side of the enclosed covered entranceway. The door is an aluminum storefront double-door that was added during the 1995 remodel. The south doors are mostly glazed with a thin aluminum fascia encompassing the glass. The door pulls are metal vertically aligned handles attached to two horizontal aluminum strips. The doors are painted green. The west door was removed and replaced with a floor-to-ceiling glazed window.

b. Windows: There are twenty metal windows and five panels of floor-to-ceiling glazed walls on the Casting Building. Original metal divided-light windows line the north, east, south, and west elevations. On the north elevation, there are eight windows. The east elevation has three windows. The south elevation has six windows and three floor-to-ceiling glass panels. The east four windows on the south elevation have a corrugated metal awning. The glass panels are shaded by the southwest entranceway awning. The west elevation has three windows and three floor-to-ceiling glass panels. All three windows on the west elevation have a corrugated metal awning. The glass panels are shaded by the southwest entranceway awning.

7. Roof:

a. Shape, Covering: The roof is a hipped roof with a slight pitch, and is covered with built-up asphalt roofing.

b. Cornice, Eaves: There is no cornice or eaves on the primary roof. There is a low parapet on all four sides of the building. There are small eaves on the covered entranceway awning.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

   a. Main Floor: The Casting Building is a one-story rectangular warehouse building with five offices, two restrooms, a waiting area, conference room, kitchen, and an open office space populated with cubicles. The rooms are laid out along the perimeter of the building with the center area used as open office space, circulation, and the kitchen.

   b. Attic: The attic is unfinished wood with a small area of plywood floor and ceiling at the top of the stairs on the west side of the building. The exposed plywood flooring on the landing at the top of the staircase is original.

2. Stairways: The one interior staircase is located on the north side of the center row of columns at the west end of the building. The stairs connect the ground floor office space to the attic. It is a single run straight stair without an intermediate landing. The stair risers and treads, apron, and handrails are all wood finished with wood varnish. The risers are steep and the treads are narrow. There is a simple wood rail to each side of the staircase attached to the wall. The staircase is original to the building.

3. Flooring: The interior floors are recently carpeted.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: The interior walls are gypsum board painted white. The ceilings are suspended T-bar ceilings with square panels. The wall and ceiling finishes are later remodels.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: There are twelve interior doors in the Casting Building. The doors are hollow wood, without panels or other decorative details. The doors are not original to the building.

b. Windows: On the north elevation, there are eight windows. Seven of the eight windows are rectangular 10-light casement windows. The 10-light casement windows have two horizontal windows and five vertical windows. Horizontally, the top two lights of the window are fixed, and the remaining eight lights are operable casement windows. At the west end of the north façade, there is a 20-light window. The 20-light window has a row of fixed lights on three sides and the remaining middle section is an operable casement window. The metal window frames, mullions, and muntins are painted green.

   The east elevation has three windows. One of the windows is a 10-light window. The top two rows of the 10-light window are fixed and the lower eight lights are operable. There are two 20-light windows. The 20-light windows have a three-sided perimeter of fixed lights and the middle eight-lights serve as operable casement windows. The metal window frames,

mullions, and muntins are painted green.

The south elevation has six windows and three floor-to-ceiling glass panels. Four of the windows are 10-light casement windows with the top two rows fixed and the lower eight lights operable. Two of the south windows are 20-light windows. The 20-light windows have a row of fixed lights on three sides and the remaining middle section is an operable casement window. The metal window frames, mullions, and muntins are painted green. The three floor-to-ceiling glass panels are high performance laminated glass in an aluminum frame. The panels are divided by a vertical aluminum mullion and a horizontal aluminum mullion near the ceiling creating a transom.

The west elevation has three windows and three floor-to-ceiling glass panels. The three windows are all 10-light casement windows with the top two rows fixed and the lower eight lights operable. The metal window frames, mullions, and muntins are painted green. The three floor-to-ceiling glass panels are high performance laminated glass in an aluminum frame. The panels are divided by a vertical aluminum mullion and a horizontal aluminum mullion near the ceiling creating a transom. The windows in the Casting Building appear original to the building.

6. Decorative Features: The utilitarian Casting Building was designed to serve as a warehouse, and the interiors have no decorative features.

7. Hardware: The windows retain some of their original hardware including the window cranks and the hinges.

8. Mechanical Equipment:

a. Heating and Cooling: The Casting Building has central heat and cooling.

b. Plumbing: The Casting Building has running water.

c. Electric: The Casting Building has electricity.

D. Site:

1. Historical Landscape Design: The existing landscape adjacent to the Casting Building on the north, south, and west sides have been altered over the years. The grass area adjacent to the building on the east appears part of the original landscape design for the studios. However, the existing orange tree was a later planting.

2. Site and Adjacent buildings: The 51-acre site on Buena Vista Street in Burbank was purchased by Walt and Roy Disney in 1938 for $100,000. Although most of the existing buildings constructed as part of the original Disney Studios campus have been altered to some degree, many of the

buildings are still extant.

Part III. Sources of Information

A. Bibliography

Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Photograph Collection, Disney Studios

Frank Crowhurst interviewed by Gerrit Roelof, "Discussion on New Burbank Disney Studio," April 16, 1940.

Original Drawings, Remodels, and Alterations, Disney Studio Archives.

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Secondary and Published Sources:

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Hollis, Richard. *The Disney Studio Story*. NY: Crown Publishers, 1988.

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Walt Disney Studios History
(http://studioservices.go.com/disneystudios/history.html).

Part IV. Project Information

This architectural recordation project, a Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) Level II documentation for the Casting Building (Building 10), was prepared for Disney Core Services, the Walt Disney Company, Burbank, California. The documentation was undertaken by PCR Services Corporation (PCR), Santa Monica, California. The survey, research and written documentation was conducted and prepared by PCR historians, Jon Wilson, M. Arch., Senior Architectural Historian, and Margarita J. Wuellner, Ph.D.,

Principal Architectural Historian. The HABS photography was completed by Tavo Olmos, Positive Image Photographic Services, Irvine, California. The project was conducted during September, October and November, 2007.

Part V. Supplemental Information

Copies of the following (historic) site plans, measured drawings, and photographs are available in the field records accompanying this report.

Plans:

1. 1958 Site plan.
2. 1978 Site plan.

Architectural Drawings:

1. Warehouse Building, Plans, Building 10, Sheet 1, September 14, 1938. F. Scott Crownhurst, Superintendent of Construction; James Lill, Structural Engineer. Walt Disney Enterprises, Burbank, CA.
2. Warehouse Building, Elevations, Building 10, Sheet 2, September 14, 1938. F. Scott Crownhurst, Superintendent of Construction; James Lill, Structural Engineer.
3. Warehouse Building, Plan, Building 10. Alterations to Warehouse Building 10, October 15, 1958. Jack Rorex, Superintendent of Construction. Wheeler and Gray, Structural Engineer.
4. Warehouse Building, Elevations, Building 10, October 15, 1958. Jack Rorex, Superintendent of Construction. Wheeler and Gray, Structural Engineer.
5. Casting Building, Plans, Building 10, Sheet 6, March 3, 1995. Hatch Design Group, Architects.
6. Casting Building, Elevations, Building 10, Sheet 7, March 3, 1995. Hatch Design Group, Architects.

Historic Photographs (with copy negatives):

1. Rendering, Casting Building, by Kem Weber.
2. Casting Building, ca. 1939.
3. Casting Building, ca. 1938-39.
4. Construction of the Burbank Disney Studios, ca. 1940.
5. Burbank Disney Studios, ca. 1947.
6. Walt Disney, Casting Building, ca. 1950s.
7. Casting Building, ca. 1970s.